



CEPPS/NDI Quarterly Report: April 1 – June 30, 2005

**MAURITANIA: STRENGTHENING CIVIL SOCIETY (05867)
USAID Cooperative Agreement No. DGC-A-00-01-00004-00**

**Project dates: April 1, 2005 to September 30, 2005
Total budget: \$96,500.00 Expenses to date: \$20,938.81**

I. SUMMARY

Mauritania stands at the geographical, cultural and political crossroads, bridging Arab North Africa and Western sub-Saharan Africa. Since its independence from France in 1960, the country has been known more for its extreme poverty, tolerance of slavery and succession of military coups than its political openness, respect for human rights or economic development. Most recently, presidential elections in 2003 were blemished by several flaws in the eyes of local observers. The arrest of the leading opposition candidate and his associates was matched on the streets with the prevention and aggressive dispersion of opposition campaign rallies by government forces. Based on its assessment mission to Mauritania in November 2003, the National Democratic Institute for International Affairs (NDI) concluded that there was not sufficient political space at the national level to conduct a meaningful program at the time.

Recently, however, there have been some indications of political opening in the country, as shown in the recognition of three “controversial” human rights organizations by the government. In addition, a national dialogue is underway, providing a forum for discussion between political parties of the governing coalition and those of the opposition, as well as civil society leaders and media representatives. While it appears that national figures have not yet earned widespread trust among Mauritanian citizens, locally elected officials seem to enjoy greater legitimacy in the view of the public. Therefore, NDI deemed it more useful to conduct a program at the local level. Hence, the Institute initiated a program that seeks to increase dialogue and cooperation between local leaders and non-governmental organizations (NGOs).

From May 15 to 22, two NDI staff traveled to Mauritania to lay the foundation for the Institute’s civil society strengthening program. The team met with a broad range of stakeholders, including government officials, the international community, NGO representatives and locally elected officials. Following discussions with civil society representatives and government officials, NDI recognized that it would be necessary to choose two cities reflective of the political and ethnic diversity of the country in order to implement the pilot project. After careful analysis and consultation with the US Embassy in Nouakchott, the cities of Atar in the North and Boghé in the South were chosen. The team traveled to both cities and met with local officials, whom it found committed to development issues. NDI also held a working session with a group of women NGO leaders representing six national NGOs and it was agreed that the first NGO

training would be held during the first week of July in Nouakchott. This training which will draw two participants from each of the six NGOs selected by NDI will focus on collaboration strategies between NGOs and local leaders, using the topic of women's rights as a case-study.

Except for a few positive signs, Mauritania's democratic development continues to lag behind, when compared to West African countries. Women's rights, however, are fairly developed here, especially in comparison with most MENA countries. The topic of women's rights therefore provides a good entry point for NDI's program, thereby allowing the Institute to equip its partner NGOs with strategic skills applicable to a variety of topics involving collaboration with local leaders.

II. BACKGROUND

In November 2003, NDI conducted an assessment mission to the Islamic Republic of Mauritania to assess the country's level of democratic development immediately prior to the presidential election. From November 2 to 9, 2003, a delegation of seven NDI experts and staff were deployed to assess prospects for democratic reform and to identify potential technical training needs of local organizations and institutions. The delegation met with leaders and representatives of political parties, civil society organizations, journalists from the independent and pro-government press; government officials, including those responsible for the administration of the elections; and officials from the international community.

Initial findings revealed that civil society in Mauritania is fragmented, and that broad-based trust does not exist between development NGOs and the more traditional advocacy groups, such as human rights organizations. Additionally, local NGOs do not integrate their agendas within the broader political environment, attract small constituencies, and do not exhibit the capacity to network or build strong coalitions capable of influencing the policy-making process.

Despite criticisms associated with the November 2003 presidential elections and widespread belief among citizens that national leaders do not hold a true mandate, locally elected officials seemed to enjoy greater legitimacy and credibility. None of the opposition parties boycotted the April 2004 local elections, which were generally considered to be reasonably well administered by local observers. Furthermore, through the government's decentralization program, municipalities now have jurisdiction over a number of social services such as health care and education, though they generally have limited budgets. Though local leaders have a stronger mandate, they do not effectively interact with citizens and do not include them in the decision-making process. Without the active involvement of Mauritanian citizens in political life, government power can be abused, and the rights and freedoms granted to citizens in a democratic society can remain unrealized. The participation of civil society is therefore an essential component of the policy-making process.

Based on NDI's November 2003 assessment mission findings, the Institute through its current program seeks to help to progressively involve Mauritanian citizens in the decision-making process. The program is designed to achieve the following specific objectives:

- Increase understanding among Mauritanian NGOs and local officials of the role of civil society in a functional democracy; and
- Help strengthen the capacity of local NGOs to communicate and interact with locally elected officials.

In order to achieve these objectives, NDI has implemented a number of activities, as described in the Activities Section of this report.

Political Update

In recent months, there have been some indications of political openness in Mauritania. First, from April 11 to 12, 2005, at the initiative of a political party in the governing coalition, the Rally for Democracy and Unity (RDU), a “Forum on Democratic Values and Citizenship” was held in Nouakchott. This forum provided an opportunity to discuss challenges to the establishment of a democratic culture in Mauritania and examine necessary reforms in key areas such as political parties and the media. This forum brought together, for the first time in the country, all political parties represented in parliament as well as civil society leaders, labor union and media representatives. The forum provided a platform for constructive debate on democratic reform. While NDI’s current program seeks to foster dialogue and collaboration at the local level, the establishment of the “Forum on Democratic Values and Citizenship” might provide an opportunity for the Institute to become involved in supporting this nascent dialogue at the national level.

Second, in May 2005, the Mauritanian government announced its decision to officially recognize three “controversial” non governmental organizations: the Mauritanian Association for Human Rights (AMDH), the Group for Study and Research on Economic and Social Development (GERDES) and SOS-Esclaves. This decision was hailed by the country’s civil society and political leaders as an important step towards political openness in Mauritania.

III. ACTIVITIES

Advance Trip: May 15-22

In order to lay the foundation for NDI’s civil society strengthening program, the Institute sent two staff to Mauritania from May 15 to 22, with the goal of identifying appropriate local officials and NGO representatives who would constitute the Institute’s partners in the implementation of the program. In addition, the team was tasked with presenting the program to Mauritanian government officials and assessing their level of interest. Lastly, NDI seized the opportunity of its presence on the ground to learn more about the current political situation in the country, the extent to which an Islamic threat exists, and any possible future openings that would allow the Institute to support democracy efforts in Mauritania.

NDI met with a broad range of stakeholders, including government officials, the international community, NGO representatives and locally elected officials. Following discussions with civil society representatives and government officials, NDI recognized that it would be necessary to chose two cities reflective of the political and ethnic diversity of the country in order to

implement the pilot project. After careful analysis and consultation with the US Embassy, the cities of Atar in the North and Boghé in the South were chosen.

The team traveled to both cities and met with mayors and representatives of the administration such as *walis* (governors) and *hakems* (prefects). The NDI team found local officials in the cities visited committed to development issues. They expressed interest in the project and the theme of the “improvement of women’s conditions”. They thanked NDI for this initiative and agreed to work with the Institute toward a town hall meeting in each of the selected cities. In Nouakchott, as well as in the two other towns visited by staff, local officials, NGOs and Mauritanian government officials were very receptive to the idea of cooperating with NDI.

In the Mauritanian capital city Nouakchott, NDI met individually with representatives of the following NGOs: the Mauritanian League of Human Rights (LMDH), the International Association of Francophone Women (AIFW), the National Forum for the Promotion of Women’s and Children’s Rights (FNPWF), the Mauritanian Association for the Promotion of Youth and Sports (AMPJS), the Women’s and Children’s Rights Defense Association (ADDFW) and Women, Environment, and Development Association (AFED). At the conclusion of the trip, NDI again met collectively with the NGO leaders to further discuss details of the program and set a date for the first NGO training. In consultation with these NGO leaders, the first workshop was scheduled for the first week of July 2005 in Nouakchott. The topic of the workshop would be: “How to Engage Local Leaders on Women’s Issues”. Each of the six national NGOs agreed to send two representatives to attend this initial training.

Meanwhile, staff also met with leaders of two political parties and learned more about the “Forum on Democratic Values and Citizenship” organized by the Rally for Democracy and Unity (RDU) from April 11 to 12, 2005. Depending on the political situation in the country during the coming months and the evolution of its current program, NDI may be well positioned to support a national dialogue and reconciliation process in Mauritania, building on its experience in other countries and regions.

NDI’s advance trip report, which provides a synopsis of findings and detailed information on the meetings held, is available upon request.

IV. RESULTS & ACCOMPLISHMENTS

Objective 1: Increase understanding among Mauritanian NGOs and local officials of the role of civil society in a functional democracy

Results:

- NDI met with NGO representatives and local leaders to discuss its program’s objectives and sensitize them to the benefits of a mutual cooperation
- One local official in the municipality of Atar stated that the municipality cannot function without the help of civil society

Objective 2: Help strengthen the capacity of local NGOs to communicate and interact with locally elected officials.

Results:

- A group of six NGOs have agreed to participate in a workshop to prepare them for a town hall meeting with local leaders in two municipalities
- Local officials agreed to work with NGOs towards the implementation of a town hall meeting in Atar and in Boghé

V. EVALUATION

Mauritania's political situation mirrors its geographical and cultural juxtaposition between the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region and West Africa. Compared to other MENA countries, Mauritania is on the forefront of women's rights and is more in line with West African countries in this regard; but the country's democratic development lags behind that of many other West African countries. However, recent developments, such as the recognition of three "controversial" NGOs and the establishment of a forum for national political dialogue, signal that Mauritania could be moving forward in certain aspects of democratic reform.

The advance trip allowed NDI to have a better understanding of the political situation in Mauritania and to establish a number of useful contacts with government officials, local leaders and NGO representatives. In order for the Institute to establish credibility and not appear biased, NDI corrected its programmatic approach by choosing two cities, reflective of the political and ethnic diversity of the country, in which to implement its program. These cities were strategically chosen in consultation with the Political Section of the U.S. Embassy.

Originally, NDI intended to work with NGOs at the local level in Atar and Boghé. However, in consultation with the US Embassy and local leaders in these two cities, it was determined that there were an insufficient number of potential NGO partners at the local level. Thus NDI adapted its program in order to work with a select number of well-organized national women's NGOs on a project involving women's issues. Women's rights in Mauritania are fairly developed in relation to other countries in the region. Hence, NDI's goal is to work with some of the best national NGOs and use this issue as a pretext to provide them with strategic skills that can be universally applied to any topic or area when engaging or working with local leaders.

VI. FUTURE ACTIVITIES

During the next quarter, NDI will implement the following activities:

- Workshop with representatives of six national NGOs in Nouakchott on the topic: "How to Engage Local Leaders on Women's Issues"
- Consultations with local leaders, civil society representatives and representatives of the administration in the municipality of Atar.